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FORBIDDEN & SUSPECT SOCIETIES

By Rev. Lawrence L. McReavy J.C.D., M.A.

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NO ONE likes to be told to ' Keep Off ' this, or ' Keep Out ' of that, except when the reason for the ban is either obvious or made clear by an added explanation. Every time, therefore, that the Church authorities declare such-and-such an organization or society to be forbidden, or warn us to keep out of it, our first and most natural instinct is to ask why. It is not a bad instinct, as long as it is coupled with a readiness to obey lawful authority, because it was God who gave us our reasoning faculty, and it is our ' reasonable service ' that He wants.[1] The object of this pamphlet is to satisfy this reasonable demand, by explaining what kinds of society the Church has banned, or declared dangerous, and why she has done so.

SOME PRINCIPLES

God made man socially inclined. It is part of man's nature, and therefore one of his natural rights, to club together with his fellows for his and their mutual benefit. The Church has always respected this right, as indeed she must ; for she has no warrant to restrict man's natural rights, except in the measure necessary to the attainment of the end which God set her to achieve. But that far her warrant certainly runs. She was instituted by Christ as the one complete, self-sufficient, and necessary society in the spiritual order, with a divine commission to bind and to loose, to teach and to guide, in a word, to organize and direct the social and personal life of her members in the manner best calculated to bring them to their eternal salvation. For that is the final end to which everything in life was designed by God to serve as a means, and to which, in consequence, everything, human freedom included, must be subordinated.

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[1] *Romans* xii. 1.

This is true even of the State. The State is the one supreme, complete, and necessary society in the temporal order, with a divine commission to co-ordinate the activity of its members for their common temporal welfare. But since man's temporal good is subordinate to his eternal good, it follows that the State, though independent in its own sphere, must shape its policy ultimately with an eye to the same goal as the Church.

Whenever, therefore, there is danger that men may be led away from this goal, by imprudent use of their freedom to form lesser societies within the framework of the Church or the State, it is the duty of the Church, and, within its own sphere, of the State also, to restrain them by warnings, and, if need be, by prohibitions and penalties. In the final issue, of course, every man still retains his basic freedom of will. He is not forced to go to Heaven. He remains free to take the road that leads to Hell. But God wants the road to be sign-posted by the public authority, and even to be declared officially closed.

We should be grateful for such sign-posts and notices, even when we cannot see the reason for them, for the Church sees further than we do. She has the benefit not only of her collective human wisdom and age-long experience, but also of the guidance and supporting authority of the Holy Spirit. Not all her decisions carry with them the guarantee of infallibility, but all have behind them the assurance of her Master: 'He that heareth you, heareth Me.'[1] In following her, we shall at least not go astray.

THE LAW OF THE CHURCH

The general law of the Church regarding membership of lesser societies within the Church or State is summarized in two canons of the Code of Canon Law.

1. 'The faithful are deserving of praise, if they join associations erected, or at least commended by the Church; but they must beware of associations which are secret, condemned, seditious, or suspect, or which seek to evade the legitimate vigilance of the Church.'—Canon **684.**

[1] *Luke* x. 16.

2. ' Those who give their names to the Masonic sect, or to other associations of the same kind, which plot against the Church or legitimate civil powers, incur by that very fact an excommunication which is reserved, in the simple manner, to the Holy See.'—Canon 2335.

THE APPLICATION OF THE LAW

The law distinguishes between societies according to their particular character ; but the terms used, ' secret, condemned, seditious, suspect, evasive,' are not mutually exclusive, for a given society may well deserve to be branded by several of these epithets. It will therefore help to a better understanding of the law if we distinguish between societies according rather to the manner and degree in which the Church condemns or stigmatizes them. Considered from this point of view, they fall into three main categories : first, societies banned under pain of sin and excommunication ; secondly, those banned under pain of sin, but not of excommunication ; and thirdly, those which are merely declared to be suspect, and therefore deserving of the special vigilance of local ecclesiastical authorities.

I. SOCIETIES BANNED UNDER PAIN OF SIN AND EXCOMMUNICATION

The archetype, or principal example, of a society banned under pain of sin and excommunication is the Masonic sect, or society of Freemasons.[1] This society derives, in its modern form, from the Grand Lodge of England, founded in London in 1717. From its very inception, it has always been a secret society, binding its members to keep certain of its activities secret even from legitimate public authority, and, as such, it first came under the ban of the Church in 1738.[2] As a matter

[1] Cf. *Freemasonry*, by Rev. Humphrey J. T. Johnson, C.T.S., H.316.

[2] Clement XII, Apostolic Letter, *In Eminenti*, 28 April, 1738. The condemnation was renewed by Benedict XIV, in 1761 ; by Leo XII, in 1821 ; by Gregory XVI, in 1832 ; by Pius IX, in 1846, 1849, 1854, 1864 ; and at great length by Leo XIII, in his encyclical, *Humanum Genus*, of 20 April, 1884.

of historical fact, it has consistently used its secrecy to enable it to conduct an underground campaign against the Church, or the legitimate civil government. This is particularly true of Masonry in its common continental form, as evolved under the aegis of the Grand Orient Lodge of France. It is less evidently true of the Masonry associated with the English Grand Lodge, which has traditionally maintained a close relationship with members of the Royal family and of the Established Church. But the condemnation passed by the Holy See is not based exclusively on the fact of subversive plotting, and is therefore not conditional on the proof of such plotting. The Church objects primarily to the secrecy which prevents her from exercising her legitimate function of vigilance, and so makes it possible for lodges to organize subversive movements under cover, as they certainly have done, and not infrequently. Moreover, as steward of the divinely revealed and supernatural religion of Christ, which all men are commanded by God to embrace, she objects to the naturalistic philosophy of life which has always been characteristic of Masonry in all its forms, and to its consequent indifferentism in regard to religious creeds.[1]

It is idle to quote the cultural and philanthropic activities in which the Masonic lodges of this or that country may seem to the outside observer to be principally engaged. Culture and philanthropy are not the final objects of human existence, and their pursuit cannot compensate for a radically false view of life. Nor is it relevant to instance the fact that English Masonry recognizes the 'Great Architect of the Universe', and actually broke with the Grand Orient, when the latter ceased to do so. A vague Deism is no substitute for the one true religion of Christ, which all men are bound by divine law to

[1] In 1927, the International Masonic Association adopted the following formula: 'Freemasonry recognizes the existence of a higher and ideal principle, which is generally known under the designation of "The Great Architect of the Universe"; it combats no particular religious creed, nor does it advocate any particular religious creed.' The English Grand Lodge is not, as far as we are aware, a member of this international body, but its attitude to religion is basically the same.

profess and practise. ' He that is not with Me, is against Me,' said our Lord: ' and he that gathereth not with Me, scattereth.'[1]

It is clear from the wording of Canon 2335, quoted above, that the prohibition under pain of excommunication applies not only to Masonry, but to any other societies ' of the same kind ', which plot against the Church or State. Some of these similar societies have already been expressly designated by the Holy See, for example, the Italian sect of *Carbonari*,[2] and the Irish or American sect of *Fenians*.[3] Others incur the excommunication by being affiliated to Masonic lodges, as are, or were, many of the earlier societies founded for the promotion of cremation. For the rest, we must decide according to the facts, whether or not they fulfil the conditions indicated in the canon ; and since it is a penal law, we are justified in interpreting these conditions in their exact and narrow sense.

Two conditions are required in order that a society may be said to be ' of the same kind ' as Masonry, and therefore to incur the same excommunication. First, it must be really a secret society, for clandestinity has always been a principal characteristic of Masonry and a primary reason for its condemnation ; and secondly, it must plot or scheme in some way to overthrow or undermine the authority of the Catholic Church, or of the legitimate civil government. It need not make a secret of its opposition to the Church or civil power, nor keep its scheming under cover, nor exact an oath of secrecy from its members ; but at least it must bind them to keep secret such things as its constitutions or leaders may require, and to refuse to divulge them even at the lawful demand of the ecclesiastical or civil authority. If either of these conditions is not fulfilled, for example, if a society imposes

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[1] *Matthew* xii. 30.

[2] Condemned under censure by decree of the Holy Office, 13 September, 1821.

[3] Condemned under censure by decree of the Holy Office, 12 January, 1870.

secrecy on its members, but does not scheme against legitimate authority, or if it schemes, but without binding its members to secrecy, it may, as we shall see, be condemned, but its members will not incur the excommunication of Canon 2335.[1]

Communism provides a practical example of the application of this principle. The Communist Party is a prohibited organization which the Church forbids her subjects, under pain of grave sin, either to join or support ; and those who go so far as to profess its materialist and anti-Christian doctrines, unquestionably incur excommunication by reason of their apostasy from the Faith.[2] But the party, as such, cannot be classed as a society of the Masonic type, because, although it plots against both Church and State, it is not, properly speaking, a secret society. It may well be that it has *inner cells* which are secret societies in the canonical sense of the words ; if so, the members of such cells certainly incur the excommunication of Canon 2335. But the party, as such, cannot be classed as secret, for it has publicly known leaders, public meetings, and a public programme, nor does it appear to bind the ordinary party member to secrecy, merely on the ground that he is a member. Hence the ordinary party member does not, by the mere fact of joining, incur the excommunication levelled against societies of the Masonic type.[3]

An excommunication is a censure by which a subject of the Church is excluded from the communion of the faithful and deprived of the ordinary rights which the faithful enjoy. It is a medicinal penalty which is meant to cure obstinate offenders, and can therefore be incurred only by those who are

[1] They may however incur excommunication on some other ground. Thus, by a recent decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Council, 29 June, 1950, anyone who plots against legitimate ecclesiastical authorities, or strives in any way to overthrow their power, or participates directly or indirectly in such an attempt, incurs excommunication, reserved in the special manner to the Holy See.

[2] Decree of the Holy Office, 1 July, 1949.

[3] This appears to be the conclusion reached by the Holy Office, for it would not otherwise have declared membership of the party to be forbidden merely under pain of sin.

guilty subjectively, as well as objectively, of the crime specified in the law ; moreover, it will be readily lifted by the Church, as soon as they repent of their sin and show their readiness to repair it. To incur the excommunication attached to societies of the Masonic type, therefore, a person must be fully aware of the true character of the society which he is joining, or in which he decides to stay, and must realize that his action is forbidden under penalty. If he does not realize this, or if he leaves the society as soon as he can, after becoming aware of it, he may indeed be regarded by the external courts of the Church as being under censure, until he proves the contrary, but he will not have incurred it in the court of conscience, or in the eyes of God.

The excommunication is a reserved censure, which means that a person who has incurred it, cannot be absolved from it except by a confessor specially empowered to do so. Moreover, he will normally be required, first of all, to resign from the society and cease consorting with its members, and to surrender any books, manuscripts, or signs connected with the society which may be in his possession.

II. Societies Banned under Pain of Sin Only

Since excommunication is a drastic penalty, it is normally reserved for extreme cases. More commonly, therefore, when the Church wants to ban a society, she limits herself to a simple prohibition. It is objectively gravely sinful for any subject of the Church to ignore such a prohibition, and if his sin is public and he remains obdurate, he will normally be denied access to the sacraments ; but in this case his exclusion is due simply to his patent unworthiness, and ceases with it.

This simple form of prohibition attaches, first, to all societies which, while they do not plot against Church or State, seek, nevertheless, to withdraw themselves from the legitimate vigilance of the Church, by requiring their members to maintain secrecy concerning their leaders, constitutions, or

activities, even in face of a legitimate demand of the Church to be informed on such matter.[1]

Secondly, it attaches to all societies which, even though they maintain no secrecy of the type described, are nevertheless of a seditious character, inasmuch as they seek to attain their ends, laudable or otherwise, by methods which are subversive or disruptive of public order. For, though it is not necessarily a crime to seek to change an existing form of government, even of legitimate government, it may only be done by means which respect the principle of authority; 'for there is no power but from God, and those that are, are ordained of God; therefore, he that resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God.'[2]

Thirdly, there are a number of societies which have been expressly banned by name, though without canonical penalty, either because they are secret, or seditious, or because they involve some other danger to faith or morals. Among those which have been prohibited over the last sixty years, the following are the principal examples.

1. Certain Societies for promoting the Union of Christendom

In a letter of 16 September, 1864, the Holy Office required the English Bishops to instruct the faithful not to join an interdenominational society, which had been founded in London, in 1857, 'for promoting the union of Christendom,' or any others like it. The reason given was that the society was based on a completely false conception of the Church, as consisting of three branches, the Roman, the Greek, and the Anglican, each with an equal right to call itself the true Church of Christ; and that to join or support such a society was bound to foster religious indifferentism. On more than one recent

[1] Cf. Canon 684; also a decree of the Holy Office, 10 May, 1884. This condemnation does not apply to those Catholic societies which, while keeping certain things secret from non-members, do not attempt to resist the legitimate inquiries of the Church authorities.

[2] *Romans* xiii. 1-2.

occasion, the Holy Office has ordered the above ruling to be observed by Catholics, and to be applied even to meetings and conferences called by non-Catholics for the same purpose.[1]

2. The Independent Order of Good Templars

This society was condemned in a reply of the Holy Office, dated 9 August, 1893. No reason was given, but since the reply expressly declined to answer a question whether the society were subject to the Masonic excommunication, and was content simply to declare it forbidden, it would appear that, in the official view, its secrecy was not coupled with subversive plotting.

3. The Odd-Fellows, Sons of Temperance, and Knights of Pythias

These three bodies were simultaneously condemned in an instruction of the Holy Office to the Apostolic Delegate in the U.S.A., 20 August, 1894, according to which the faithful were to be warned not to become, or remain, members of these societies, under pain of being denied access to the sacraments. No reason was given in the instruction, but it is a known fact that all these societies impose an unlawful measure of secrecy on their members, and that they profess and practise a naturalistic form of religious worship. The condemnation[2] must be taken to apply equally to the *Rebekahs*, and to the *Pythian Sisters*, which are affiliated female versions of the Odd-Fellows and Knights of Pythias respectively.

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[1] Cf. replies dated 4 July, 1919, and 8 July, 1927. The Church is, of course, anxious for Christian unity, and Benedict XV, 25 February, 1916, approved the observance of the Church Unity Octave, held annually from 18 to 25 January; but she cannot approve a movement based on the denial of her claim to be the one true Church. Unity can only come by the return of the dissident bodies to the one fold, under the one shepherd.

[2] We are informed that the American Order of Odd Fellows, against which, presumably, the condemnation was primarily directed, broke away from the Manchester Unity branch of the Order in the early nineteenth century, for ritualistic reasons which do not apply to this and other branches of the Order in England. These latter cannot therefore be said to be directly affected, unless the local Ordinary should rule otherwise.

4. Spiritualist Societies

In a reply dated 27 April, 1917, the Holy Office declared it unlawful to assist, with or without a 'medium', at any spiritualistic communications or manifestations whatsoever, even such as may appear to be blameless or pious, whether by asking questions of the souls or spirits, or listening to the answers, or merely looking on, even with a tacit or express protestation that one does not want to have anything to do with evil spirits. It follows that no Catholic may join, or participate in a spiritualist society, even for purely scientific reasons.

5. Theosophic Societies

These were condemned by a decree of the Holy Office, 18 July, 1919, in which it was declared ' that theosophic doctrines, as they are nowadays called, are incompatible with Catholic doctrine, and that it is therefore unlawful to join theosophic societies, to take part in their meetings, or to read their books, periodicals, journals, or writings.' Theosophy is a pantheistic philosophy of life, oriental in origin, which was modernized by Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society in New York, in 1875, and popularized by her disciple, Mrs Besant. As evidence of its incompatibility with Catholic doctrine, it is sufficient to point out that it denies the existence of a personal God, and personal immortality.

6. The Friends of Israel Society

This organization was abolished and prohibited by decree of the Holy Office, 25 March, 1928. It had been founded with the laudable intention of promoting the conversion of the Jews, and numbered among its members and supporters, not only many priests, but even some Bishops and Cardinals. The Holy Office paid tribute, in the decree, to its laudable intentions, and took occasion to reprobate ' that spirit of hatred against

the once chosen people of God, which is called anti-semitism.' Nevertheless, it found it necessary to suppress the society, because it had eventually 'adopted a manner of acting and speaking which is quite contrary to the spirit of the Church.'

7. The Communist Party

Membership of the Communist Party was forbidden under pain of grave sin by a decree of the Holy Office, 1 July, 1949. As we have already remarked, it may not be a secret society, in the normal sense of the term, but it is certainly subversive. Moreover, even though it may pretend to leave its members free to practise their religion, it indoctrinates them with a materialist and anti-Christian philosophy. This philosophy itself had, of course, long been condemned, and as the above decree points out, to adopt it is an act of apostasy, which, if it be deliberate, automatically involves excommunication.

III. Societies Declared Suspect or Deserving of Caution

The principal threat to the purity of the Catholic faith, in modern times, does not so much arise from the open attacks of its declared enemies, as from the general atmosphere of religious indifferentism in which most Catholics have to pass their daily lives. All societies which are impregnated with this atmosphere may be said to be, in greater or less degree, suspect.

In the sixteenth century, when the unity of western Christendom was disrupted by that wave of heresy and schism which is so inappropriately called the Reformation, the sects which broke away from the Catholic Church had at least this much in common with Catholics, that they believed religious truth to be knowable and were convinced that they alone possessed it in its purity and entirety. Splinter groups, like the Elizabethan establishment in this country, and the Church of Calvin at Geneva, began by believing that every other Christian body save themselves was gravely and sinfully

wrong, and ought to be suppressed by law. It took quite a while before they came to realize the intrinsic absurdity of their claim, but when eventually they began to yield to the logic of faith, reason, and history, unwilling still to admit that they had erred in leaving the one really historic Catholic Church, they fell back on the bland assumption that everyone alike was out of step, that Christ's prayer and promise had failed, and that no individual Church had a unique claim to be that one true Church which He Himself had declared would never fail. Hence, for their primitive ideal of converting all others to their way of thinking, they substituted a practical policy of pooling their respective contributions in a union of churches, and ironing out their differences by the simple process of agreeing to ignore them. This latitudinarian attitude in theology, which became almost universal among the non-Catholic sects in the nineteenth century, eventually filtered down to the man in the street in the form of religious indifferentism; so that, nowadays, few non-Catholics attach any great importance to what a man believes, as long as his behaviour is not socially objectionable. Indeed, the only dogma that is any longer acceptable to the majority, whether or not they profess to be Christians, is that there should be no dogmatizing about religious truth, and that Christianity is best conceived as a rather superior code of ethics.

It is in this atmosphere that most Catholics have to live nowadays. They cannot hope to escape it altogether while they remain in the world, because it permeates everywhere, not only in the press, radio, theatre and cinema, but also through every relationship and association, industrial, professional, cultural, and recreational, which brings Catholics into contact with non-Catholics. The Church neither hopes nor seeks to shield the faithful from all occasions in which they are exposed to this atmosphere, poisonous though it be to orthodoxy; but she would be failing in her duty if she did not strive to seclude them at least from those occasions in which the danger is most real and imminent. In actual fact, the danger is most real, because most effectively concealed,

precisely in those societies which set themselves to promote good conduct or good works among their members, but yet do so independently of the faith, sacraments, and moral authority of the one true Church, founded by Christ, who alone is ' the way, the truth, and the life.'[1] Precisely because they profess a noble ideal, the unwary Catholic is less likely to suspect any danger to his faith in joining them, and the danger is thereby increased. It is, of course, possible for a man to imbibe religious indifferentism in his trade union, or golf club ; but he is far more likely to do so in an ethical or philanthropic society. It is, therefore, more particularly in regard to associations of this kind that the Church nowadays summons the Bishops to exercise their pastoral vigilance.

The two most publicized examples in recent times have been the warnings issued in regard to the Y.M.C.A. and the Rotary Clubs.

1. The Young Men's Christian Association

In a circular letter dated 5 November, 1920, the Holy Office called the attention of the Bishops to the fact that some modern non-Catholic associations involve a danger to faith, especially to that of Catholic youth ; because, although their declared purpose is simply to cultivate the character and habits of youth by good training, they make a religion of this culture, and base it on complete freedom of thought, unhampered by any denominational creed or affiliation. Young Catholics who join such associations are brought thereby into contact with men who communicate to them their own fluctuating and questioning attitude to religious truths, and substitute for their traditional faith a vague and undefined form of religion which is certainly not that of Christ. They profess to be guides in good living, but in fact they foster religious indifferentism.

'Among these associations,' the letter continues, ' it will suffice to mention one which is, as it were, the parent of many others, being extremely widespread (especially owing to its

[1] *John* xiv. 6.

valuable relief service during the War), and backed by immense resources, namely, the Young Men's Christian Association, or Y.M.C.A. It has the undiscerning support, not only of well-meaning non-Catholics, who think it salutary to all, or at least harmful to none, but also of some easy-going Catholics who are blind to its true nature. It proclaims its sincere love of youth, as though it had nothing more at heart than to serve their bodily and mental welfare ; but at the same time it weakens their faith, under the pretext of purifying it and giving them a better knowledge of the true life " above every church and independently of any religious creed ".'

The letter concludes, therefore, by calling upon Bishops everywhere ' to guard young people carefully from the contagion of such societies,' to provide and foster Catholic societies, and to agree among themselves, in regional meetings, on measures suitable to meet the situation.

2. Rotary Clubs

The Church's attitude to Rotary is inspired by similar motives. Rotary is neither a secret nor a subversive association. Its object is to unite together men representative of the various professions in their locality, to set before them a code of private and professional conduct, to gather them for a weekly luncheon rounded off with an informative talk, and to organize their corporate activity for social and philanthropic purposes. All this seems innocent enough to the undiscerning eye, and yet the Holy Office, in a decree of 22 December, 1950, thought it necessary to forbid clerics to be members of Rotary Clubs, or to assist at their meetings, and called the attention of the faithful to Canon 684, which, as we have seen, bids them beware of associations which are secret, condemned, seditious, suspect, or evasive of the legitimate vigilance of the Church.[1]

[1] According to an unsigned, but obviously authoritative article in the semi-official Vatican newspaper, *Osservatore Romano*, 27 January, 1951, the prohibition affecting clerics applies only to meetings which are exclusive to Rotarian members and deal with Rotarian affairs, and does not therefore prevent clerics from attending meetings which are open to non-members, and are called for purposes compatible with priestly activity.

Since Rotary is neither secret, nor seditious, and has never yet been formally condemned by the Church, the implication is clearly that it is in some way suspect and deserving of caution. And we can easily guess the reason for the Church's suspicion. By presenting itself as a guide to good living, in complete independence of any denominational creed or moral authority, Rotary encourages the all too common view that man is his own sufficient guide in interpreting the moral law, that any creed will do, and that no particular religion is obligatory. In other words, like the Y.M.C.A., and other such cultural and philanthropic associations, it tends to beguile the unwary Catholic into moral naturalism and religious indifferentism. Moreover, it would appear that in some countries it has become infected by Masonic and anti-clerical elements.

The extent to which the official suspicion is warranted in any particular area, is clearly a question of fact which can only be judged in the light of local circumstances, and which the Holy Office therefore leaves the Bishops to decide locally. Bishops who find that, in their particular area, the suspicion is well founded, are expected to take appropriate measures, even to the extent of forbidding their lay subjects to be members of the local Rotary Clubs. On the other hand, Bishops who are satisfied that the danger is not great locally, or that adequate safeguards have already been provided, may remain silent. Unless, therefore, the danger is real and obvious, or scandal is likely to be caused, laymen can safely and conscientiously await the guidance of their own pastors in regard to their attitude to Rotary.

It should hardly be necessary to add that there is room for caution, not only in regard to those societies which have been the object of an express and official warning, but in regard to any association which involves a real danger to faith or morals. Catholics cannot hermetically seal themselves off from contact with non-Catholics, nor should they seek to do so ; but they are expected to use prudence in preserving the precious treasure of their faith, to be alert to the many dangers inevitable

to life in the largely pagan world of to-day, and not to expose themselves to such hazards rashly or unnecessarily. He that would sup with the devil, should use a long spoon, says the proverb. The Church issues warnings only when she feels that real dangers are being overlooked: she expects us to notice and avoid the obvious ones. Moreover, even though a given individual may feel strong enough in his faith and firm enough in his moral principles to withstand the danger involved in membership of this or that society or group, it does not follow that he is always justified in becoming or remaining a member. If the society is condemned, he may neither join nor remain in it; for 'laws made to guard against a general danger continue to bind, even though, in a particular case, the danger does not arise.'[1] And even when it is a case of a society that is merely suspect, he should bear in mind that, by becoming or remaining a member of it, he may lead weaker brethren into a danger which they cannot withstand. God requires us to use our freedom, not merely with prudence, but also with charity.

[1] Canon 21 of the Code of Canon Law.

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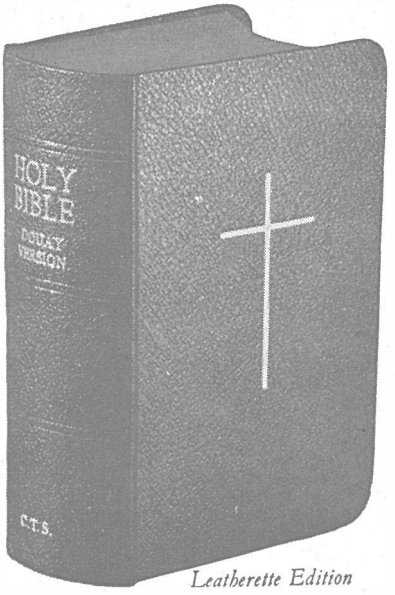

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